Parliamentary Committees and Multi-Party Government

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Abstract: Although committees constitute one of the most significant and well-researched forms of internal legislative organization, little is known about the nature and causes of variation in committee structures across different legislatures. It is suggested that, under parliamentarism, strong committees can emerge as a structural solution to the need of each party in coalition government to monitor the behaviour and actions of ministers from other parties within the coalition. This proposition is tested against alternative explanations of institutional design using new data on committee structures in 31 democratic assemblies. We provide qualitative evidence by exploring temporal changes in committee structures in Ireland and linking observed changes to the emergence of a norm of coalition government.
Introduction
Within comparative politics it has become increasingly common to suggest that legislatures are important institutions or, at the very least, institutions whose significance has long been underestimated (Döring 1995; Tsebelis 1999). Historically characterized as subordinate to the executive in parliamentary systems of government, recent research suggests that legislatures do indeed play a significant role in policymaking and in keeping watch on the actions of the executive branch (see, for example, Martin and Vanberg 2005). Despite this, we know very little about how and why legislative structures have evolved in parliamentary systems. This lack of knowledge is in stark contrast with the rich literature on the origins and consequences of internal legislative design under presidentialism (Gamm and Huber 2002) – in particular, on the US Congress (for competing explanations of committee power in the US Congress see, among others, Cox and McCubbins 1993; Krebs 1991; Maltzman 1997; Shepsle and Weingast 1987). Legislative specialists have been remarkably unsuccessful at transposing theories of Congressional committees to a cross-national perspective (see, for example, the notable exclusion of committees as a topic in the volume edited by Loewenberg, Squire, and Kiewiet [2002]).

In parliamentary systems, comparative work on committee structures is largely, if not exclusively, institutional and descriptive in nature and ambition (see Mattson and Strom 1998; Lees and Shaw 1979). The lack of comparative theory building is further aggravated by the lack of comparable data on national committee systems. Sparse attempts at comparative theory building are largely driven by the comparison of committees in the United States and the United Kingdom in particular, opposing strong committees to strong parties (Lees and Shaw 1979 – for a different view see Cox and McCubbins 1993). As a result, the structures and powers bestowed upon committees are largely viewed from the perspective of a cross-party model of decision-making and opposition strength (Andeweg and Nijzink 1995). Only as no single party can exercise effective control are strong committees expected to develop. The key to understanding American exceptionalism are the low levels of cohesion that Congressional parties exhibit (Lees and Shaw 1979). Strom (1990) related committee powers to minority government, highlighting how opposition parties can influence policy if the legislature has a strong committee system. Powell (2000:34) noted the relation at face value of strong committees and PR electoral systems. Extending the argument, it could be suggested that the strength of a legislature’s committee system is determined by the prevailing type of political institutions in that polity, particularly whether the legislature operates in a consensus or majoritarian democracy (Lijphart 1999).

Recent scholarship, influenced in particular by practices in the German Bundestag, provides a compelling argument for the role that legislatures play in making and maintaining multiparty government (Martin 2004; Martin and Vanberg 2004, 2005). Government parties use the legislature to overcome problems of ministerial drift in multi-party government by scrutinizing more closely
policies that have been drafted by coalition partners. As a result, combining the institutional research tradition and more recent scholarship, we will argue that government parties are more likely to agree to rule changes that boost committee structures’ and powers’ effectiveness. After all, legislative organization is not exogenous in that a majority of the legislature itself may alter its structure. No majority will condone a legislative organization that is disadvantageous over any length of time (Cox 2006; Krehbiel 1991, 2004). On the contrary, legislative rule changes are often better explained by even short-term partisan gains than by any considerations for the opposition. Congressional majority parties, for example, have been most successful in limiting minority rights, the stronger the majority party is relative to the minority (Binder 1996).

First is explained why partners in a coalition government may be willing to develop strong committees. Second, a new cross-sectional dataset of committee structures in 31 national parliaments is introduced, which is used to test the main argument that relatively stronger committees are to be found in legislatures associated with multi-party government. Third, we will use Lieberman’s (2005) strategy of combining large-N and small-N analysis to verify with the case of Ireland (on the regression line) that ‘keeping tabs’ on coalition partners is in fact what motivates governing parties to agree to develop stronger committees. In the final section, wider implications of the research, both for our understanding of internal legislative organization and the nature of multiparty government are discussed.

**Coalition Government, Delegation, and Legislative Organization**

Increasingly, decision-making within coalition government is understood in terms of a principal-agent relationship (Andeweg 2000; Strom 1995, 2000). From this perspective, the Cabinet delegates the formulation of policies to individual cabinet ministers. However, ministers have an incentive to deviate from the agreed-upon policy position and that incentive increases as their policy preferences are further apart (Martin and Vanberg 2004, 2005). This incentive further increases under conditions of hidden information and hidden action (Kiewiet and McCubbins 1991). Ministers acquire information within their jurisdiction – aided by an extensive civil service and, possibly, frequent relations with specialized interests. Feasibility constraints can be exploited as ministers defend their policies as ‘all that could be done’ in the given circumstances – a claim that easily defeats verification (Martin and Vanberg 2004). Moreover, ministers’ post- and non-legislative actions may affect policy implementation but are generally not subject to Cabinet approval (Huber and Shipan 2002). Ministers may even gain position-taking benefits – even as their policies are reversed in Cabinet (Martin and Vanberg 2005). As a result, ministerial drift is more likely to be a problem for multi-party than single-party governments. In most situations, policy differences across parties can be assumed to surpass policy differences within a single party,
thereby multiplying ministers’ incentive to renege on the coalition policy agreement compared to members of single-party governments. Moreover, a single-party government leader has the political ability to keep tabs on or remove ministers in a way that is unlikely when dealing with ministers from a coalition partner.

Problems of delegation in the presence of divergent preferences are not uncommon in politics and a number of solutions have been identified in the literature. Ex ante mechanisms – so common in parliamentary systems of government (Strøm 2000) – to ‘keep tabs on coalition partners’ are unlikely to be very effective. Detailed coalition agreements cannot remove the risk of coalition partners seeking to renege on the agreement, especially, if they are unlikely to be found out, and if there are position-taking benefits (Müller and Strøm 2000). But ministers may agree to ex post mechanisms and present proposed policies before inner cabinets, specialized cabinet committees, permanent coalition committees, or ad hoc party summits to iron out disagreement once it is revealed – rather than to unearth it (Müller and Strøm 2000:20-1). Junior ministers may be assigned to ‘shadow’ ministers of the coalition partner (Thies 2001). Deputy prime ministers or finance ministers (and their extensive political staff) may serve a similar purpose (De Winter et al. 2000; Saalfeld 2000).

Recent scholarship provides a compelling argument, furthermore, that parties participating in multi-party government will, in certain circumstances, make use of parliamentary scrutiny to ensure coalition policies are being implemented. Cabinets in Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands, Martin (2004) noted, introduce bills on which the coalition partners agree early in the term and postpone more controversial bills. Bills that are contested among coalition partners, Martin and Vanberg (2004) added, also face more detailed scrutiny in committee, lengthening the delay these bills are subjected to in the German and Dutch parliaments. Bills that are contested by the opposition do not face similar legislative delay. Bills that are contested among coalition partners also have more articles amended in committee. Bills, on the other hand, by ministers that are shadowed by junior ministers of another party have fewer articles amended in committee. (Martin and Vanberg 2005) Further evidence is provided by the assignment of committee chairs: German political parties predominantly use their share of committee chairs to shadow a ministerial portfolio held by a coalition partner (Kim and Loewenberg 2005). Lithuanian parties adopted similar strategies in appointing committee chairs, even as they continue to rely more strongly on junior ministers shadowing coalition partners (Clark and Jurgelevilt 2008).

Parties’ need to ‘keep tabs’ on coalition partners is also likely to impact the legislative organization, in particular committee structures and powers: that is, only as long as committees continue to serve
governing parties’ need to monitor one another, will they agree to change the rules and extend committees’ powers. Focusing on committees as a solution to ministerial drift clearly has advantages. A strong committee system is likely the best form by which the legislature can hold accountable the government, individual cabinet ministers or the bureaucracy (Lees and Shaw 1979). Structured committee systems within the legislature can monitor the executive branch in at least two ways. First, committees can scrutinize draft laws emerging from the government. Significantly, they can do so more efficiently and effectively than the plenary assembly because of gains from trade, information acquisition and specialization by committee members (Krehbiel 1991). Secondly, and equally if not more significantly, strong committees can keep watch on the post- and non-legislative activities of the executive, particularly where parliamentary committees shadow a particular government department. A substantial number of ministers’ actions never require the legislature’s assent. Indeed, Hallerberg (2000) concluded that when ministers decide on the budget within their ‘fief’, multi-party coalitions tend to be scrutinized by stronger committees whereas single-party governments tend to face weaker committees. When the risk of ministerial drift is smallest, that is where drafting budgets is delegated to a strong finance minister (i.e. ‘delegation states’), committees tend to lack extensive budgetary powers.

It is important to understand how committees systems actually ‘evolve’ or ‘adapt’ to meet the needs of multiparty government. The key to understanding this process is to appreciate the effective political control that the governing party or coalition of parties has on parliamentary reform. The structure of committees and the resulting strength of committee systems are not exogenous in that a majority of the legislature itself can change and amend structures. Under parliamentarism, this translates into the governing parties having agenda and/or veto power over how committees are designed. Majority governments, be they single party or coalition, are generally unconstrained in determining the actual structures and powers of committees. In the United Kingdom, for example, the Leader of the House of Commons, whose task it is to direct parliamentary business and issues of parliamentary reform, is a member of the cabinet.

**Empirical Data and Assessment**

Based on the above analysis, we expect to find relatively stronger committees in legislatures associated with multiparty government. Single party government will tend to be associated with relatively weaker committees.

Reliable, comparable information on the committee systems of national legislatures is not readily available. Therefore, new data was compiled on committees in each of the national parliaments included in the study using multiple sources and in-depth country surveys over a period of six months. The countries whose legislatures are included in this study have been parliamentary
...democracies for ten or more years and correspond closely to the list of OECD and European Union member states (excluding presidential systems).

The data collection focused initially on an analysis of national constitutions and standing orders of the legislature. To ensure the accuracy of information collected from official sources and to collect missing data, a written questionnaire was sent to the administrative head of each legislature. This was followed up, in the case of non-respondents, with written and telephone contact with the office of the presiding officer (Speaker, President). Consequently, the focus in this section is on cross-national differences in committee structure at a particular period of time (updated in March 2009). Historical data on committee structures proved impractical in all but a handful of the better-archived legislatures. At this stage, adding a limited number of qualitative analyses may help to address the issue. Future research, however, will need to step up data collection on contemporary changes in committee structures so as to add a temporal component to the cross-sectional analysis presented here.

**Dependent Variable: Measuring Committee Structures and Powers**

Facing the risk of ministerial drift, government parties will agree to (or, at least not seek to reverse) rules that provide committees with extensive structures and powers in order to ‘keep tabs’ on coalition partners. As a result, this paper will employ a decidedly institutional perspective. From an institutional perspective, a strong committee is one that is *structurally equipped* with the ability to impact the legislative process and provide some element of oversight of government activity. First, the rules are more readily controlled by parties than the more outcome-focused assessments that country experts commonly make of the, typically, weak policy impact of committees (and as a consequence, parliaments). Arguably, government parties’ rationale can be more readily studied in its relation to parties’ *output* (the rules parties adopt) than to an *outcome* they have no (complete) control over. Second, committees may serve the purpose of reducing ministerial drift, even without affecting policy. Committee members may signal deviations from the agreed-upon policy to their ministers, who may then seek redress within the cabinet.

Information collected on current committee structures in 31 national legislatures is used to develop an index of committee strength based on responses to nine questions. Each question aims to uncover important choices in the design of committee systems, choices that impact on whether or not committees may be useful to reduce ministerial drift.

(a). *Are committees jurisdictional to ministerial portfolios?* The more closely the committee system corresponds to ministerial portfolios the better able committees are to monitor the actions and behaviour of individual ministers and hold ‘property rights’ over proposed legislation and oversight in
a particular area of policy. It may be more difficult to keep tabs on individual ministers where committees have a cross-departmental remit, or where multiple committees oversee the same ministry. JURISDICTION is expressed as the proportion of Cabinet ministers whose portfolio matches the jurisdiction of a single committee.1

(b). Are bills considered by committees prior to the plenary stage? The earlier a committee involves itself in the process of law-making the more influential it is likely to be. It is likely more difficult for a committee to influence a bill where the bill has already been debated and voted on in the floor of the house.

(c). Do committees have the right to initiate legislation? The ability to act independent of the executive by introducing legislative proposals signals a strong agenda setting role for committee systems in policymaking. Even if a minister shirks from promised legislation, strong committees may be able to compensate for ministerial inaction by introducing legislation independently.

(d). Do committees have the right to amend proposed-legislation and/or re-write bills? Weak committees may have little scope to amend proposals coming from the executive whereas stronger committees should be empowered to redraft or otherwise reshape government bills. In some cases a minister may be able to veto amendments made by the committee, thus reducing the significance of the committees' role in shaping and monitoring policy change.

(e). Can committees compel ministerial attendance and evidence? Having the power to compel individual cabinet ministers to attend a committee meeting and supply oral testimony places committees in a strong position to monitor a minister's activity. Committees can use such hearings as an opportunity to question a minister on her activities and policies and determine how the minister's actions and attitude might differ from coalition policy.

(f). Can committees compel civil servants to attend? Civil servants act as an important source of ministerial information but also as agents of the minister. As such, they are in a position to inform on the actions or inactions of ministers. Committees empowered to compel public servants to attend and supply oral testimony are better able to oversee and judge the performance of executive departments.

(g). Do sub-committees exist? Sub-committees provide a mechanism for committees to further specialize and delegate workload. The gains from division of labour brought about by delegation within committees will likely strengthen the efficiency and overall effectiveness of the committee system.

(h). Can committees issue minority (dissenting) reports? Minority reports act as an important source of critical information where the committee is unable to reach a consensus. For example, minority reports have the potential to be used as a source of output for inter-coalition tensions because one party can publicly digress from the policy of other parties in government but nevertheless not withdraw legislative support in a roll-call. Equally of course, minority reports can be used by parties outside government to put forward ideas different to government policy. While the latter may not be in keeping with our theoretical claim that committees exist to facilitate the needs of parties in government, the need to allow parties in government publicly diverge while maintaining voting unity in the chamber may outweigh any cost to the government of allowing parties outside government oppose government policy.
Is committee time unique? Legislators have limited resources, not least of which is time. If members must choose between committee work and attending plenary sessions they may be less inclined to focus on committee assignments. It is therefore important for the strength of the committee system that committee time be separately timetabled from when the plenary is meeting.

Table 1: Committee Structures and Powers in 31 National Legislatures

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<th>D</th>
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The nine aspects of committee structures above represent an attempt to explore cross-national variation in the strength of committee systems. It is certainly possible to question the significance of any one of the above questions, or to suggest that other features of committee systems should have been explored. It would be unwise to single out any one variable and say that it could, by itself, conclusively provide a measure of committee structures and powers. In the subsequent analyses, we will use the logarithm of the sum of these nine aspects of committee structures and powers. We acknowledge that a common problem with the reductionism employed here is that it
loses some valuable information. For example, most of the above questions could be investigated further. In reality, the difficulty of collecting information on even the most general features of committee structures renders it difficult to deepen the investigation. The variation in committee structures and powers reported in table 1 confirms the suspicion that legislative committees do indeed show a major degree of cross-institutional variation. The obvious question for social scientists is to consider when and under what conditions we expect particular committee systems to emerge.

*Independent and control variables*

To test the theory of committee systems detailed above, data was collected on government-type between January 1979 and March 2009 for each country in the study. The data on government type was collated using a number of sources including Müller and Strøm (2000) and various editions of the Annual Data Yearbook of the *European Journal of Political Research*. For countries not reported in any of the above sources, as well as more recently formed governments, the data collection relied on *Keesing’s Record of World Events*.

Governments were coded as single party (minority or majority) or multiparty (minority or majority). To identify a change of government, the following four criteria were used: (1) a general election or, (2) a change in the parties in government, or (3) a change in the status of government from minority to majority or single-party to multiparty, or (4) a change of prime minister. Two different measures of government form will be inputted into the regression analysis: the variable *Current Government* captures whether the government in place as of March 2009 is either a single party or a multi-party administration. *Rate of Coalition Government* measures the rate of coalition government in each country between January 1979 and March 2009. While committee structures and powers can be changed by simple majorities, they are also *sticky* and unlikely to be adapted to what are deemed temporary or extra-ordinary circumstances. Therefore we add the rate of coalition government as a check as to how common the current government form is for governments in the past.

The impact of coalition governments is tested against theories that focus more on the role of the opposition: in particular, the consensual nature of the polity and the frequency of minority governments. It could be suggested that a legislature’s committee system depends on whether the legislature operates in a consensus as opposed to majoritarian democracy (Lijphart 1999). As noted earlier, strong committees have conventionally been associated with opposition influence. Stronger committees may, therefore, be a feature of consensus political institutions with weaker committee systems more likely to exist in majoritarian political systems. To test the claim that legislatures in consensus systems have stronger committee structures, Lijphart’s original data have
been supplemented with data on Eastern European democracies provided by Roberts (2004) and Fortin (2004). Having adding Eastern European countries to his original dataset, each of Lijphart’s ten variables was re-standardized, following his original method (see Lijphart 1999: 247fn1) for all 31 countries included in this study. The variable Degree of Consensus measures the degree to which the political system can be described as being consensus-based, as defined by Lijphart (1999).5

Strom (1990) considered strong committees to be a significant factor in determining the propensity for minority governments to form. Although we make no prediction about the relationship between minority/majority government and committees we nevertheless include two measures of minority government: the variable Current Minority Government measure whether or not the government in office as of March 2009 was a minority (coalition or single party minority) or majority (again coalition or single party majority). We also provide a more temporal measure of minority government: the variable Rate of Minority Government measures the rate of minority government formation over the period 1979-2004. The inclusion of both measures of minority government should allow us to discount any relationship between strong committees and minority government.

In addition, the analysis is controlled for the size of the legislature and the electoral system. It may be the case that larger legislatures are more likely to have committees because larger chambers may find it difficult to operate effectively unless some form of internal organization allows for delegation, such as from the chamber to committees. Smaller legislatures may have the opposite problem, possibly lacking enough members to staff a committee system even if a strong committee system were otherwise the preferred option. However, it may be inappropriate to conflate the number of committees (large legislatures may or may not have more committees) with committee significance. Size of Legislature is a continuous variable that measures the number of members of the lower chamber.

Finally, in American politics, strong legislative committees are associated with the candidate-centered electoral system and the related need for members of Congress to cultivate a personal vote. Katz and Sala (1995), for example, argue that with the emergence of the Australian ballot and the resulting need for incumbent members to cultivate a personal vote, legislators looked to committees as a means of creating policy changes (and redistributive benefits) for which they could claim credit in their home districts. Therefore, we employ Carey and Shugart’s (1995) index of particularism to control for the effect of electoral system candidate-centeredness on committee structures. The index measures the degree to which incumbents are required to cultivate a personal vote in order to get re-elected. The index is compiled using data from the
database on *Particularism Around the World* (Seddon Wallack et al. 2003). Additional data for countries not included in that database (The Czech Republic, Estonia and Slovakia) is sourced from the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) Database on Electoral System Design, with the coding for each of these countries being completed by the authors. In summary, the variable *Electoral System* measures the incentive created by the ballot structure for individual legislators to cultivate a personal vote.

**Results and Analysis**

As predicted, legislatures tend to have stronger committee systems in countries with coalition government. In contrast, legislatures tend to have relatively weak committees in countries where single party government is the norm. Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between the form of government over the period 1979-2009 and committee strength while Table 2 reports OLS regression results using robust standard errors. Model 1 shows the relationship between the current form of government (as of March 2009) and the strength of committees, providing a temporal match between the data on committees and government form, to be positive and statistically significant at conventional levels. As predicted, current government is positively related to committee structure: in countries that are ruled by a coalition government, committees tend to enjoy more extensive powers to scrutinize the government, and initiate and amend legislation.

The current form of government is most positively related to the aspects of committee powers that include the match of their jurisdiction to ministerial portfolios, their right to initiate and amend legislation, and their ability to examine bills before the floor stage. It is also related to committees’ organisational attributes: their abilities to form subcommittees, to prevent floor discussions coinciding with committee meetings, and to issue minority reports. However, the current form of government is most weakly related to committees’ capability to compel the attendance of civil servants: in particular, select committees in some Westminster countries enjoy this capability, while generally lacking the same capability to compel ministers’ attendance.
Table 2: Results of OLS Regression Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DV: Committee structures and powers</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3 cabinets since 1979</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Current coalition</td>
<td>0.416</td>
<td>0.484</td>
<td>0.270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rate of coalition government</td>
<td>.075</td>
<td>.049</td>
<td>0.020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree of consensus</td>
<td>0.154</td>
<td>0.163</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current minority government</td>
<td>0.154</td>
<td>0.163</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rate of minority government</td>
<td>0.050</td>
<td>0.105</td>
<td>0.035</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electoral system</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size of legislature</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central and East European Countries</td>
<td>0.153</td>
<td>0.105</td>
<td>0.105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westminster</td>
<td>0.313</td>
<td>0.337</td>
<td>0.179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>1.347</td>
<td>1.238</td>
<td>0.488</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-square</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adj. R-square</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>.30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Robust standard errors in parentheses
* significant at the 5% level in a two-tailed test, ** significant at 1% in a two-tailed test

Turning to our control variables, coalition government is a better predictor of committee structure than Lijphart’s measure of consensus. Similarly, the analysis disclaims any perception that parliamentary committees tend to be stronger under minority government. Together these constitute the most common circumstances in which the opposition is likely to have a greater impact on policy. Theories focusing on the opposition, however, fail to explain why the government parties that hold a majority of seats in Parliament would accept rules that do not benefit them. While Lijphart’s degree of consensus is positively related to committee strength that relation disappears once the distinction is introduced between single-party and coalition governments. In addition, the size of the legislature has no significant effect on committee structure - legislatures with more members are no more likely to have strong committee systems than smaller ones. The extent to which the electoral system is candidate-centred has no statistically significant impact on the structure of committee systems. Model 1 shows that the relationship between the structure of the electoral system and the committee structure is positive but statistically insignificant. Each of the control variables introduced in his model, the degree of electoral system particularism, Lijphart’s degree of consensus, the size of the legislature and the rate of minority to majority government are statistically insignificant at conventional levels.

Among the parliaments that have provided committees with more extensive powers, many are Eastern and Central European parliaments: Slovenia, Lithuania, and the Slovak Republic, in particular. For one, the relative weakness of extra-parliamentary party organizations — in
particular, in the early years – may have contributed to parliaments’ propensity to extend committees’ powers (Agh 1998). In addition, parliaments were modelled after experiences in Western Europe, Germany in particular. (Crowther and Olson 2002; Agh 1998). For this reason, Model 2 includes a dummy variable for each of two groups of countries whose joint experiences have been deemed relevant for the development of committees: the Central and Eastern European countries and the Westminster countries (see Lees and Shaw 1979). While Central and Eastern European countries tend to have extended committees’ powers, including the dummy variable does not alter the effect of coalition governments. Overall, multi-party government remains a better predictor of committee structure than Lijphart’s distinction between consensus and majoritarian traditions of political institutions. Westminster countries tend to be on the lower end of the spectrum, even if the dummy variable does not have a discernable effect. Adding both dummies, however, results in the electoral system having a positive effect on committees’ structures and powers: parliaments elected on the basis of more candidate-based rules tend to award committees more powers.

Model 3 reports the same relationships, but substitutes the current form of government for the rate of coalition governments over the 1979-2009 period. Even as committee structures are exogenous in that, typically, they can be changed by simple majorities, they are sticky. Parties are unlikely to fundamentally alter committee structures and powers for short-term gains – just as they will not tolerate structures and powers that put them at a disadvantage over a longer period of time. Countries that have a high percentage of coalition governments during the period from 1979-2009 tend to have relatively strong committees. In fact, the three countries with the strongest committee structures in the sample (Japan, Austria, and Slovakia) had coalition governments during most of this period. Again, the electoral system is positively related to committee strength although this relationship is not statistically significant. Again, the size of the legislature and the distinction between majority and minority government are found to have no impact on committee structure.
The position of some countries in Figure 1 merits further analysis. Despite the dominant position of the LDP in Japan for most of the post-war period, committees enjoy important structural and procedural capabilities - modelled after the example of Congress during the post-war occupation (Baerwald 1979). In its heyday, however, the LDP was deeply factionalised and junior ministers of one faction were frequently added to ministers of another, for instance, to ‘keep tabs’ on them (Thies 2001). Committees may have served a similar purpose – in particular, as the system grew more competitive after 1993. Below the regression line, on the other hand, are France and Greece. The position of France, in particular, runs counter to the main argument in that the powerful committees of the Fourth Republic were dismantled before even the party system evolved towards a bipolar structure. Nevertheless, before the creation of the UMP no single party had obtained a majority of seats.

Further evidence that committees may be used as watchdogs vis-à-vis coalition partners can be found in the position of committee chairs. Kim and Loewenberg (2005) concluded that German parliamentary parties use the position of the committee chair: especially the larger parties disproportionately seek out chairs of committees matching ministerial portfolios held by coalition partners. Smaller parties are not awarded as many chairs. The cross-sectional evidence reported below in Figure 2 provides further corroboration for the main argument that committees may serve to ‘keep tabs’ on coalition partners. Not only is the rate of watchdog committee chairs...
'shadowing' a coalition partner's minister closely related to the form of government – both current and over a longer period of time; it also closely matches the committee structures and powers (corr. .39, p < .05). To be fair, part of the relation between watchdog committee chairs and coalition governments is mechanical: chairs of single-party government parties have no coalition partners to ‘shadow’. Yet, the rate of watchdog committee chairs is not just closely related to the form of government, but even to the effective number of parties in government.

Clark and Jurgelevilt (2008:640) conjectured that this mechanism is dependent on the relative size of the plurality party: the closer a party is to achieving a majority, the more it will resist being monitored by its coalition partners. This is confirmed in Figure 2: as the number of effective parties in government is closer to 1 (being a single-party government) the rate of committee chairs ‘shadowing’ a coalition partner decreases. Rather more interestingly, as the number of effective parties approaches 2.6, parties begin to find it difficult to lay claim to a sufficient number of committee chairs to keep tabs on one another. Belgium and Estonia are outliers in this respect: removing them would cause the quadratic function to reach its peak a bit earlier (at 2.6), but would not alter its course (and would actually increase the r-square). Controlling for the electoral system, the degree of consensus, the rate of minority governments in the same five-year period (and even the Central and East European countries’ and Westminster dummies) does not affect the impact of the effective number of parties in government on the rate of ‘watchdog committee chairs.’

It is worth re-emphasizing that the results provide only an indirect test of the causal argument put forward in this paper. Ultimately, some form of time series cross-sectional data would provide a more convincing set of evidence to support the hypothesized relationship between government form and committee structures. Given the great difficulty of collecting historical information on committee structures in all but a handful of well-archived legislatures, the data presented here is as extensive as is currently available on committee structures.
Confirming the Pattern: The Case of Ireland

The addition of qualitative case study research to a large-N analysis, Lieberman (2005) attests, aims to verify the causal linkages posited between independent and dependent variables on the basis of the large-N analysis. In this first instance, the selection of cases on or close to the regression line – cases which the theory appears to explain – contributes to demonstrate within-case processes. It would be wrong not to recognise the limitations of the cross-sectional empirical approach employed in this paper. The impracticality of collecting temporal data on committees remains an obvious concern when trying to understand the relationship between committees and government form. We use a case study of the evolution of committees in the Irish case to help demonstrate that the hypothesis put forward here, that committee structures and powers are developed in order to ‘keep tabs’ on coalition partners, is in fact ‘what is going’. Therefore the case selection focuses particularly on political systems which moved from experiencing single-party government to multi-party government. Ireland moved from having predominantly single party government (between 1932 and 1982) to a situation where, today, multiparty government is the norm. In the future, more cases will need to be analysed – in particular, cases ‘off’ the regression line, cases that do not appear to fit the causal mechanism posited.

The Irish committee system altered as part of a coalition agreement in the 1980s during the Fine Gael/Labour coalition government. Prior to the 1980s single party government was the norm in
Ireland with only two brief periods of multiparty government since the foundation of the state in 1921. Historically, committees in the Irish legislature were amongst the weakest of any democratic assembly, being few in number, having no fixed jurisdiction, lacking basic resources, meeting only sporadically and enjoying few if any real powers. Cautious about being subsumed and overwhelmed by the larger coalition partner, the smaller Labour Party agreed to enter government in 1983 on the condition that the Irish parliament would be reformed to allow for a stronger committee system (Arkins 1988). The 1983 committee system vastly expanded the number of committees, the range of topics under committee jurisdiction and the role of committees in reviewing of legislation and oversight of the executive. A recognised aspect of that first committee system was that committees were prevented from having a distributional function, with government spending still tightly controlled by the executive. Although it was widely agreed that the new committees brought greater life to the role and function of the Oireachtas, the single party minority Fianna Fail government elected following the 1987 general election quickly moved to downscale the committee system. The number of committees were cut to pre-1983 levels, staffing and research resources were scaled back and meetings for the committees that remained were curtailed. In one move, the single party minority government undid virtually all committee reform introduced by the previous coalition government, despite replying on the support of the second party for its legislative agenda and continuation in Office. Interestingly then, the Fine Gael party was happy to acquiesce to the diminution in the Oireachtas committee system.

It was only after the 1992 election which saw the emergence of a Fianna Fail and Labour Party coalition government that the committee system was again strengthened. Committee reform was discussed as part of the negotiations leading to the formation of the coalition and noted as a priority of government reform in the coalition agreement. The number of committees were increased to provide for a committer to shadow each ministerial department. A payment for committees chairs and party whips was introduced to enhance the prestige of committee assignments. Moreover, more work was delegated to committees, both legislatively and in terms of investigating government departments and agencies. The power to compel witnesses was introduced, although the majority retained the right to compel a witness who refused to attend. Since 1992 the committee system has continued to play a greater role in the work of the legislature than had previously been the case, surviving changes in the composition of successive coalition governments.11

**Conclusion**

Committees are one of the most significant forms of internal legislative organization. Despite this, existing research has failed to explain why we see variation in committee structures across
different legislatures. This paper proposes a rational-efficiency view of legislative structures, showing that strong committees serve as a solution to the problem of principal-to-agent delegation inherent in the politics of multiparty ministerial government.

The evidence presented suggests that committee systems vary in design and importance from legislature to legislature and that, as expected, a significant proportion of this cross-national variation is related to the type of government (single versus multi-party government). As predicted, strong committees tend to exist in multiparty coalition systems while weaker committee systems tend to exist in legislatures than spawn single party governments.

In addition, recent changes in the committee structure of Ireland which interestingly retain strong-party credentials, provide qualitative evidence of the link between strong committees and multiparty government, thus helping uncover the micro-level mechanisms that lead to strong committees under parliamentarism. Such comparative in-depth work should help overcome any concerns of reverse causality – the idea that strong committees may be causing multiparty government. Yet, beyond the evidence from Ireland that changes in the pattern of government form precede changes in committee structures, there are other good reasons for suspecting that committees are more likely to depend on government form rather than government form depend on committee structures. For example, in most political systems it would seem easier to change internal legislative structures than the party system – perhaps the most significant factor in determine whether governments are single party or multiparty. As Carroll, Cox and Pachón (2006) point out, a multiparty regime is unlikely to revert to a two-party regime because the executive is probably composed in part of smaller parties that would have a strong survivor-incentive to veto any electoral rule that would ensure a switch to a two party (and thus single party government) legislature. Committees, on the other hand, in the flow of institutional design, seem more adaptable, particularly for a government with a majority of seats in the legislature.

Beyond the immediate findings, a number of significant implications follow from this research. Conventionally, strong committees have been associated with weak parties as, for example, in the case of the United States Congress. Strong committees have also been associated with political systems that promote effective oppositional influence as, for example, in the case of Italy. The theoretical argument put forward calls into question these predictions, arguing instead that strong committees emerge to serve the needs of parties in government rather than parties in opposition. Any argument that a strong committee system is incompatible with strong, cohesive and disciplined legislative parties – a typical feature of parties in parliamentary systems - seems less obvious when we observe strong committees serving the needs of government parties under parliamentarism. The implication that legislative committees compliment rather than challenge
political parties, finds resonance in the work of Cox and McCubbins (1993) on legislative structures in the United States Congress.

This research adds to a recent and growing literature on the role of institutions in managing and helping coalition government survive. While scholars have focused extensively on the making and breaking of coalition governments, much less is known about how multiparty government actually operate and what if any institutional devices help competitive political parties govern together. Understanding the role of legislative institutions in facilitating and maintaining multiparty government illuminates the inaccuracy of conventional views of legislatures as weak and insignificant institutions in parliamentary democracies. Ultimately, we need to understand better why otherwise similar political systems select different mechanisms to monitor the implementation of coalition policy. The study of multiparty government needs to focus to a greater extent on such procedures and mechanisms, how and especially why they vary from country to country and how such variation in institutional devices impacts the viability of different combinations of parties in government.

References


Keesing’s Record of World Events.


Roberts, Andrew (2004). ‘What Type of Democracy is emerging in Eastern Europe?’, Typescript. Department of Political Science: Northwestern University.
Endnotes

1 Matching ministerial portfolios to committee jurisdictions is of course a complicated matter. As Rommetvedt (1998:76-7) pointed out, even when correspondence is taken to be ‘total’ – as in Norway – committees typically deal with a significant number of budgets that originated in other ministries. Nevertheless, committees continue to have their main connections with specific ministries. Based on the jurisdiction descriptions on the official websites of the governments and parliaments (March 2009), we counted the number of Cabinet ministerial portfolios and permanent committees that demonstrated ‘full correspondence’ – and counted the number of ministerial portfolios that are ‘shadowed’ by more than one permanent committee who taken together fully matched the ministerial portfolio at one half point. This sum is expressed as a proportion of the number of Cabinet ministers. Junior ministers are disregarded, because their portfolio often overlaps with their senior minister’s. Ministers without portfolio (including the Prime Minister) are similarly discounted – as are permanent committees that merely deal with in-House matters (incl. members’ privileges, in-House artwork, etc …). 

2 The new data is highly correlated with earlier data available on a select number of committee systems and where variation existed it could generally be traced to changes in committee structures and powers.

3 For newer democracies, only governments formed during democratic rule are included (most central-European countries became functioning democracies in the early 1990s).

4 As reported in table 2, regression analysis found that committees were no stronger in countries with minority governments than in countries with majority governments.

5 In his original data analysis Lijphart (1999) found that the 10 variables cluster around two dimensions. However, subsequent work has found that these dimensions do not withstand the inclusion of data from Eastern European countries. For this reason, a general measured of consensus is reported, rather than using one of the original dimensions. Using either dimension does not significantly alter the results.

6 Available online at http://www.idea.int/esd/.

7 While an exploratory factor analysis confirms said interrelations of the different aspects of committee structures and powers, the results are not as sturdy as to base further analysis on.

8 To test the robustness of the results to alternative specifications of electoral rules, all models were re-estimated using a second measure of the incentives to cultivate a personal vote. Following Hix (2003), each country was coded as being either candidate-centred, party-centred or having an electoral system that producing mixed incentives to cultivate personal votes. The estimated results found using this alternative measure of electoral rules are virtually identical to those found using Carey and Shugart’s framework. These results are available from the authors upon request.

9 The effective number of parties in government is a mean over the past five years: for each government in office between January 2004 and 2009 the effective number of parties in government was computed – based on the proportion of cabinet ministers for each of the coalition partners.
Again, based on the jurisdiction descriptions on the official websites of the governments and parliaments (March 2009), we matched permanent committees’ jurisdictions to ministerial portfolios. We, then, counted the number of committee chairs that are held by a different government party than the one holding the ministerial portfolio – expressed as a percentage of the total number of committee chairs held by government parties. This was necessary, otherwise the measurement would simply reflect whether committee chairs are being allocated on a proportional basis or not. Again, junior ministers were disregarded, because their portfolio often overlaps with their senior minister’s. Ministers without portfolio (including the Prime Minister) were similarly discounted – as were permanent committees that merely deal with in-House matters (incl. members’ privileges, in-House artwork, etc …). In the case of Italy, we traced committee chairs to the constituent parties of Berlusconi’s Popolo della Libertá.

Our research is currently undertaking interviews with current and previous politicians to get a better sense of the process of committee reform as seen from inside the legislative and government.