Who brings home the pork? The role of electoral context and localness in assigning committee seats in the German Bundestag

Thomas Gschwend / Thomas Zittel

ABSTRACT

The assignment of committee seats is a major choice political parties need to take each new legislative cycle. Distributive theories of legislative organization suggest that electoral systems structure these choices. They hypothesize that parties allow nominally elected legislators to pursue personal votes in legislative contexts by assigning them to electorally advantageous (pork) committees. In contrast, in proportional closed party list systems, committee assignments are said to be more likely to serve as means for parties to specialize in policy matters. This paper theoretically develops and empirically tests this argument for the German case on the basis of a new and rich data set including statistical data for five legislative terms (1983, 1987, 1998, 2005, 2009) on an overall universe of 2,865 observations. The paper aims to contribute to debates on legislative organization and the behavioral implications of electoral incentives in this regard. Particularly, the paper contributes to debates on the functioning of mixed systems in this regard. Mixed systems provide variance with regard to the crucial electoral incentives that are said to affect the assignments of committee seats while holding many other variables constant.

Keywords: Legislative Organization, Committee Assignments, Political Parties, Electoral Systems

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INTRODUCTION

Legislative committees are important features in legislative decision-making. The question of who gets to serve on what committee is thus an important one to the functioning of the broader democratic system. The literature on how political parties assign legislators to committees emphasizes a number of potential goals parties have when making such assignments, such as the aim to prevent agency loss in parliamentary policy making, the need to mobilize policy expertise in committee decision making, and the wish to satisfy voters.

We conceptualize the committee assignment process as a “personnel strategy” by which parties seek to deploy available talent so as to maximize their collective goals. We consider these personnel strategies aimed at matching talent with purpose to be shaped by electoral system variables but also by available talent.

In this paper, we offer a systematic analysis of committee assignments in the German Bundestag to test our assumption. We theorize that features of the German mixed-member proportional electoral system, in which some members are nominally elected in local single member districts and others by party lists in multi member districts, potentially provide parties with incentives to assign legislators with a local constituency to pork committees and legislators with national constituencies to other committees designed to maximize policy expertise and to focus on shaping partisan politics. The result is that both types of legislators are able to pursue policy benefits of interest to their specific constituencies.

Unlike some earlier literature, we do not see committee assignments as being exclusively driven by distinct electoral rules such as the mode of election. Rather, we argue that parties aim to match particular committees with high quality applicants. Particularly, we hypothesize that legislators with pronounced local roots one the one hand will tend to secure locally oriented committee posts, independent of their mode of election. On the other, parties will be sympathetic to their goals since given the overall proportional nature of the German mixed-member system, they may help the party win votes regardless of whether they are nominally elected or not.
ALLOCATION OF COMMITTEE ASSIGNMENTS UNDER MIXED-MEMBER PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION

Our perspective on the politics of committee assignments builds on the insights of a much-cited article by Stratmann and Baur (2002). These authors suggest that German parties respond to the mixed-member system in strategic ways to reap electoral benefits from the process of assigning committee seats. Because votes and legislative seats are won differently in the two distinct tiers of a mixed-member system, strategies to allocate committee seats are said to differ by tier in order to please different constituencies (see for a similar argument Lancaster and Patterson 1990).

Germany’s mixed-member system generates two different types of constituencies. Approximately half of the members of the German Bundestag are elected in single-seat districts by plurality; this is the nominal tier. These legislators thus face local constituencies. The rest of the seats are elected via closed party lists in a proportional voting system—the list tier. Formally, these legislators face regional constituencies as they are elected on the basis of statewide party lists. Practically, they cater to national constituencies due to the relative ideological homogeneity of German political parties and due to the division of labor between the Bundestag and the Bundesrat, the second chamber that represents state (Land) interests. For these reasons, we will refer in the following to “national constituencies” rather than to regional or state constituencies.

If the electoral system creates different types of constituencies, how might parties cater to these constituencies via their party personnel strategies, how are they able to choose which committee is “right” for which member? The answer to this question requires parties to understand the nature of particular committees in light of the different constituencies they have to respond to.

Committees in the Bundestag differ in their suitability for pleasing different types of constituents. Most committees are partisan committees focused on maximizing policy expertise and debating partisan policies. Some committees, on the other hand, clearly are more distinct and thus differ with regard to the type of constituencies they focus on. The Committee on Transportation, Building and Urban Affairs in the 17. Bundestag is one example for a committee
with a local focus. Among others, it drafts national plans specifying where motorways, streets and bridges will be built or repaired as part of the national budget (*Verkehrswegenplan*). These public works projects allow the members of the committee to direct federal funds to their electoral districts to support local enterprises and the local economy. Other examples that fall into this category are the committee for agriculture and the defense committee. The committee on defense has an important role in allocating military deployments and thus in allocating jobs and public works projects to local communities. The agriculture committee participates in allocating significant amounts of subsidies to farmers (e.g. *Agrarexportförderung*, *Grünland Milchprogramm*) and also to rural areas for infrastructural developments (e.g. *Gemeinschaftsaufgabe Verbesserung der Agrarstruktur und des Küstenschutzes*).

In contrast to local (pork) committees, policy committees allow political parties to strengthen their profile on national policies and thus to please national constituencies. These committees predominantly deal with general kinds of legislation that either regulates the behavior of all citizens or that distributes benefits to broad categories of citizens such as the poor or the unemployed. The Labor and Social Affairs Committee of the German Bundestag for example significantly affects social policies that decide on the volume of transfer payments and related conditions of eligibility. These programs relate to broad ideological debates on values such as individual freedom, self-reliance and justice and allow parties to develop distinct policy profiles and address larger national coalitions of voters. Legislators serving on these committees function as their party’s representatives for specific policy profiles and positions in specific national policy domains.

From the perspective of political parties, the crucial question is, which of these two committee types should be staffed by which legislator to best please the constituency related to each of the committee types? Stratmann and Baur (2002) conclude that parties assign legislators on the basis of their mode of election. Legislators elected via the nominal tier are said to be assigned to pork committees to allow them to please the local constituency in which they earned their seat. In turn, legislators elected via party lists are said to be assigned to those committees that could be instrumental for pleasing national constituents by developing clear-cut partisan policies.
Committee assignments are thus considered to provide opportunities for electoral gains in the respective tier of the mixed-member system.

This article proposes an alternative vision on what exactly parties care about when assigning legislators to either one of the two types of committees. We suggest that parties indeed aim to please their dual constituencies in the process of assigning committee seats but that they assign committee seats based more on individual level talent and aptitude rather than the mode of election. Particularly, the “localness” (defined below) of their members should be of major concern in assigning legislators to pork committees. We assume that parties will assign legislators with a high degree of localness to those committees suitable to please local constituents. We furthermore assume that parties will assign in turn legislators with a weak degree of localness to those committees instrumental to please national constituents, independent of their mode of election.

We propose this alternative vision of the politics of committee assignment for two different reasons that we wish to explain in the remainder of this theoretical section. First, by assigning legislators to pork committee, parties provide members with a strong local orientation and with the wish to please the local constituents they feel close to with means of doing so. In the German case, the modes of election do not determine the motivations of German legislators. Nominally elected legislators have no monopoly on constituency representation (Saalfeld 2008). This is first and foremost because of the frequent practice of dual candidacy. In the 2005 federal election, 1,050 candidates (45 per cent) ran in both a nominal district and on the party list. Only 434 candidates (18 percent) ran solely in one of the 299 electoral districts, while 862 (37 per cent) competed only on their party’s list (Zittel and Gschwend 2008). Among those elected, the percentage of dual candidacies is even higher. Manow (2007) reports an average of around 80 percent of MPs that were dually listed in most recent elections. Because of the frequency of dual candidacies, most German legislators combine a national with a local focus.

Moreover, some dual candidates who lost their district race subjectively perceive themselves as district representatives and aim to “shadow” the incumbent constituency representative (Schweitzer 1979, Klingemann and Wessels 2001, Zittel 2014). The reasons for this special
motivation to focus on local contexts can be manifold. Such legislators might simply enjoy the role of a good constituency members, or they might pursue future career objectives to increase their electoral security in the long run (Roberts 1988). However, we suspect that these special individual level motivations to please local constituencies also result from close personal and social ties to particular districts.

A second reason for our emphasis on localness results from the fact that we expect parties to be sympathetic to the demands of local legislators motivated to please local constituents. In Germany’s mixed system increasing national vote shares should be more important to parties than winning districts and thus modes of election. Locally well-connected legislators are assumed to be especially helpful with regard to the former goal independent of whether they are able to win a nominal vote or not. Thus, accommodating local legislators’ preferences in the assignment process is not a matter of courtesy, but rather is driven by the collective interest of parties seeking to win elections in the context of Germany’s mixed-member proportional system. In the following remarks we will further explain this point.

The German system is a mixed-member proportional (MMP) system in which the list tier compensates parties, on a national basis, for deviations from proportionality that arise from the allocation of nominal-tier seats via plurality rule (Shugart and Wattenberg 2001b). Thus it is the list vote that determines the overall allocation of seats in the Bundestag, implying that it is this vote that parties should be primarily focused on. Parties’ nominal-tier seat totals are subtracted from the allocation they receive in the list tier to maintain proportionality, and thus parties are normally unable to win additional seats simply by increasing their nominal votes.

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3 Incumbents generally enjoy high electoral security in German politics. Roberts (1988) nevertheless concedes that nominally elected MPs enjoy a competitive edge in terms of electoral security. Manow (2007) underscores this argument in a most recent analysis on turnover in the German Bundestag. He demonstrates a higher electoral security of directly elected incumbents compared to those incumbents that entered the German Parliament via the list vote.

4 The only exception here is when a given district victory results in an additional seat beyond the party’s entitled share, based on list votes. This results in so called “overhang seats” (Überhangmandate), which we address below.
To further illustrate the proportional nature of the German mixed system, it is worth contrasting it with the other main class of mixed-member system, those that are classified as mixed-member majoritarian (MMM) by Shugart and Wattenberg (2001a). In these systems, list seats are allocated in parallel to the nominal-tier seats, rather than in a compensatory manner. Only in the MMM variant, as used for instance in Japan, are there formally two truly independent tiers of election functioning on the basis of two different electoral systems (Pekkanen, et al. 2006).

The proportional nature of MMM systems such as the German one suggests so called contamination effects between the nominal and the list tier (Cox and Schoppa 2002, Gschwend, et al. 2003, Ferrara and Herron 2005). From the perspective of contamination theorists, mixed-member systems are perceived as a particular type of electoral system rather than a compilation of two different electoral rules. They are said to be characterized by particular effects at the levels of voters and elites. One argument made by “contamination theorists” emphasizes a spillover from the multiparty competition characteristics of PR to the nominal-tier context (Ferrara, et al. 2005). This is the type of contamination that emphasizes parties’ collective interests in having candidates and legislators with a strong local focus. The assumption is that parties choose candidates for the local districts to give themselves a human touch and thus to help their list-vote share. Their expectation is that fierce electoral competition at the nominal tier driven by strong local candidates helps their vote share.\(^5\) MPs with a strong local focus motivated to represent local constituencies are thus a strong asset from the party’s perspective independent of their mode of election.\(^6\)

We argue that the compensatory nature of the German MMP system provides a particular incentive for parties to take contamination effects into account in their personnel strategies and to

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\(^5\) In this case, the direction of spillover goes both ways. PR competition spills over into the nominal tier on the one hand because the latter is dominated by the expectations of political parties aiming to increase a proportional share of their vote. The vote choices of voters spill over from the nominal tier to the list tier because increases in the share of the nominal vote translate into gains in the list vote.

\(^6\) Note that under an MMM system, candidates with local appeal would be desirable for parties even if there were no spillover (contamination). Under MMM, every additional seat that a party wins in the nominal tier increments its overall seat total. However, under MMP systems as in Germany, the logic for localness would be almost nonexistent without an expectation of spillover effects, because the compensation mechanism of MMP means that any additional nominal-tier seat won is simply one less list seat won (excluding districts that generate overhangs, which we address below).
place a high value on the localness of legislators in the process of committee assignments. Our argument can be pushed to the extreme for further clarification in the following way. Even hopeless legislators who will never ever be able to win their district should receive consideration for constituency committees if they are able to demonstrate localness. This is certainly true for small parties in German politics that are most unlikely to win any district at all. But this should also be true for bigger parties with fair chances to win nominal votes. The reasons can be demonstrated in a short thought experiment. Consider a local candidate of a particular party who managed to increase his or her vote share in the nominal tier from 25 to 35 percent. Consider now a local candidate that managed to increase his or her nominal vote share from 49 to 51 percent. If we wish to predict which one of these two candidates would be most likely to be assigned to a constituency committee, we would pick the first candidate, notwithstanding that this candidate lost the nominal-tier race, while the second candidate won. If the contamination theory holds true, large swings in vote shares at the nominal tier should translate into large swings at the PR tier and thus into increases in parliamentary seats. Legislators who manage to deliver these results to their party should receive its utmost attention.

Prior to the 2013 election, the compensatory nature of the German mixed-member system was disturbed by surplus mandates (Überhangmandate). Parties receive surplus seats if they manage to win more nominal-tier seats than what would be their proportional entitlement based on list votes (Behnke 2007). Until the 2013 election, surplus seats were not compensated by additional seats to other parties, and thus they disturb the predominant role of the list vote in the process of vote-seat allocation (Farrell 2001). Although the number of surplus seats had been increasing since 1990 (Behnke 2007), they remained a small enough part of the overall picture that they do not undermine the notion that the electoral system is fundamentally compensatory (Gschwend 2004). Thus we are safe in saying that list votes are the most important determinant of seat allocation (unlike in MMM systems). We do not dispute that winning nominal votes might be a

7 The number of surplus seats increased from an average of 2.75 between 1949 and 1990 to 16 in 1994. It went down to five seats in 2002 but increased again to 16 seats in the Bundestag elected in 2005. Declining turnout and the increasing fragmentation of the German party system are major and lasting factors behind this development (Behnke 2007).

8 In close elections, even the small disturbance to proportionality created by surplus seats can have a considerable effect on government formation. The last Kohl Government (1994 - 1998) rested for example on
goal for political parties and that it might play some role in their personnel policies, or even that its importance may be growing as the number of surplus mandates increase. Rather we dispute the notion that it is the only goal for parties. We argue in turn that legislators’ “localness” is a phenomenon independent from the mode of election and that it does matter in the process of assigning committee seats in the German Bundestag.

We shall conclude our theoretical considerations on the politics of committee assignments in Germany with a final qualification. A party’s interest in supporting legislators with a strong local focus independent of their mode of election is of course dependent on the behavior of voters and on whether voters cast straight-ticket votes. To be sure, split-ticket voting is considered to be on the rise in German elections. But a large majority of German voters still cast a straight ticket in federal elections (Schön 1999, Gschwend, et al. 2003). This reinforces the parties’ perceptions that running strong local candidates and helping legislators with strong local orientations to please their local constituencies will translate into increasing list-vote shares and thus in gains in parliamentary seats.9

THE PROCESS OF COMMITTEE ASSIGNMENTS IN THE BUNDESTAG

Before proceeding with our empirical analysis on the above argument, we need to turn our attention to how the committee-assignment process in the Bundestag works. To what extent are parties able to exert control over this process? To what extent are they constrained, and by what factors? Particularly, with regard to our argument, it is important to establish how parties, as collective actors, relate to their individual members. If parties are not dominant actors in the

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9 For a more differentiated version of this argument distinguishing between three different mechanisms of contamination see Ferrara et al. (2005: 68–69)
sense that they are able to exert significant control over the committee-assignment processes, our assumption that parties are implementing personnel strategies in this very process would be implausible. Yet if individual legislators are not able to satisfy their own interests and orientations on how they wish to serve what kind of constituency, if they are mere puppets on a string in the assignment processes, then the incentives of legislators to serve specific constituencies via serving on specific committees would be weak.

With regard to committee assignments, an interactive bargaining process involving both leadership and individual legislators characterizes the German case and thus supports our argument. Neither Maltzman’s (1995) principal–agent model nor Weingast and Marshall’s (1988) emphasis on self-selection are able to satisfactorily model the politics of committee assignments in Germany. The formal process of assigning committee seats stresses the role of the leadership of the parliamentary party groups. In the Bundestag, committee seats and chairs are first distributed in proportion to the strength of the parliamentary parties (Edinger 1992, Röper 1998). The parliamentary party groups then allocate “their” committee seats among their members. In the SPD, FDP, and CSU, the step of allocating each party’s posts is coordinated by the Chief Whips of the parliamentary parties. The CDU puts a special “panel on the assignment of committee seats” in charge of this process. This is partly due to the special role of the regional subgroups within this party since this panel is made up of the chief whip and the chairs of the regional subgroups. The final decision on committee assignments in all party groups first requires the agreement of the parliamentary party leadership (Fraktionsvorstand), and then by majority vote in a general meeting the agreement of the whole party group (Fraktionsversammlung) (Schüttemeyer 1998, Ismayr 2000). The special role of the leadership is emphasized by its right to withdraw legislators from committees even during the legislative cycle (Edinger 1992).

Nonetheless, party leadership does not single-handedly determine committee assignments. Instead, Ismayr (2000: 167) characterizes this process as lengthy and conflict ridden since party leadership.

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10 The CDU and the CSU form one party group in the German Bundestag. Each party however receives committee chairs depending on its overall share of seats and independently allocates these seats among its members in coordination with its “sister party group”.
groups aim to be responsive to the wishes and motivations of their members despite the structured and disciplined nature of party politics in Germany (Saalfeld 1995). The political groups consult their members about their committee preferences at the beginning of the legislative term in formal ways. It is common practice in all parties to explore member preferences through internal questionnaires distributed prior to the decision on committee seat allocation; in all cases the Chief Whip coordinates this process. The chairs of the policy task forces and the chairs of the regional chapters of the party groups also survey their members and develop ideas on seat allocation (Ismayr 2000: 174). These initial consultations follow lengthy informal negotiations between leadership and ordinary group members.

Conflicts about committee assignments can be severe. Seats are scarce and the stakes are high for individual legislators. This is especially true for large party groups where each legislator will generally receive only one assignment. Committee assignments are crucial steps in political careers, especially for freshmen legislators. They determine the ability to gain visibility in the political realm, to acquire political status, and thus to advance politically. The right committee assignment could be a stepping-stone, whereas the wrong committee assignment could put a legislator’s career in jeopardy.

The contentious processes of assigning committee seats is guided by a few informal commonly agreed upon rules, which provide some kind of structure and minimize conflict. Seniority in a given committee plays a crucial role in the allocation of committee seats and the ability of legislators to secure their most preferred committee assignment. As a common practice, committee members are able to keep their assignments after re-election if they wish to do so. Many committee seats are simply returned to their previous holder (Kaack 1990). Each committee is also made up of an equal number of “deputies”. If legislators wish to take a seat on a new committee, having served as a deputy in this committee in the previous parliamentary session generally helps their cause.

The previous observations on the process of committee assignments in the German Bundestag highlights available opportunities to parties to pursue “personnel strategies” in assigning committee seats and also opportunities for motivated legislators to pursue the kinds of
assignments they wish to secure for themselves. We now turn to a description of our data and how we operationalize our key variables, namely “localness” and constituency-related committee assignments.

DATA, INDICATORS, AND HYPOTHESES

Our argument raises two crucial operational questions: 1) What does “localness” mean in empirical terms? 2) How can we distinguish empirically between different types of committees aiming at different types of constituencies? These are the questions we will turn to first in this section.

Measuring Candidates’ Localness

We will answer the first question by analyzing the biographical and political ties of legislators that ran as dual candidates to local districts. We justify this emphasis on the basis of two key arguments: 1) Deep biographical and political ties to local communities guarantee first hand knowledge of local affairs and also lasting personal, professional and political contacts to local level elites and ordinary citizens. This should particularly increase individual motivations to take care of local problems among others to help personal friends and political long-standing companions; 2) Deep biographical and political ties to local communities also signal to other actors such voters but also political parties that legislators have special first hand knowledge of local affairs and also are able to effectively mobilize volunteers and voters in election campaigns (Shugart, et al. 2005, Andre, et al. 2014). It thus signals a particular type of talent. Our assumption is that a legislator is closest to his or her district if he or she is born there, went to school there, and lives there. In contrast, we consider those legislators most distant to their districts that have none of these three properties. Additionally, we assume a particular level of closeness to districts if legislators held or hold elected local offices.

In order to assess degrees of candidate “localness” we are able to draw from a new set of pooled statistical data on candidates in the German Federal Elections of 1983, 1987, 1998, 2005, and
This dataset contains 9,939 candidate-observations, for 7,583 unique individuals of all major parties (Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Social Democratic Party (SPD)) and minor parties (Christian Social Union (CSU), Free Democratic Party (FDP), Alliance ‘90/The Greens (Green Party) and the Left Party). Among all candidate-observations, 2,967 are stemming from winning candidates (i.e., legislator-observations). We have compiled candidate information for 5 elections: 1983, 1987, 1998, 2005 and 2009. Variables correspond to three major categories: PERSONAL (candidate biographical data), ELECTORAL (district characteristics and candidate vote totals, etc.) and POSTS (party, committee, and cabinet positions).

The data collection relies on three sources. All the biographical variables of the PERSONAL data category and the party and cabinet position variables of the POSTS data category are based on Kürschner’s Volkshandbuch. The committee variables of the POSTS category were from Biographisches Handbuch der Mitglieder des Deutschen Bundestages 1949-2002. Rudolf Vierhaus and Ludolf Herbst with Bruno Jahn, eds. Munich 2002/2003. All other variables are based on the data provided by the Office of Federal Returning Officer.

Tab. 1: The localness of German legislators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>N / Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Local Biography</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born in district</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>2754</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Went to school in district</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1905</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resident of district</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>2713</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>48</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2818</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index: LocalBio (0=weak, 3=strong)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>2876</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>48</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2876</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The analysis in this paper looks at five empirical indicators to measure the “localness” of legislators resulting from their biographical and political backgrounds. With regard to
biographical backgrounds we look at the following three variables: 1) The birthplace of legislators and whether it was in their districts; 2) The place legislators went to school and whether they spend at least some time of their school days in their district; 3) The place legislators live and whether this is in their district, With regard to political background, we highlight two variables: 1) Whether legislators held local mandates; 2) Whether they served as mayors. We transform these variables in two indices that both form our main independent variables and that are summarized in Table 1.

The descriptive findings in Table 1 demonstrate significant individual level differences with regard to both of our indexes measuring localness. Our index measuring biographical localness indicates a significant minority of almost 20 per cent that shares no local biographical roots whatsoever compared to 6 per cent that are deeply rooted in their districts. This latter group was born in the district, went to school there and lives there. In between these extremes we see a fair share of variance at moderate levels of biographical localness. Similarly, our index on political localness demonstrates a fair share of variance between 45 per cent of legislators that never held an elected office at the local level, 48 per cent that held one elected office at the local level, and 7 per cent that held an elected office in the executive (mayor) and in the legislative (city council).

Committee Types in the Bundestag

Our dependent variable concerns the distinction between local constituency committees (pork committees) and national (party) constituency committees. How can we empirically distinguish these two types of committees? In order to answer this question and construct a dependent variable for our further analysis we begin with the distinction made by Stratmann and Baur (2002: 508) between district committees, “where funds can be channeled to the home district” and party committees, which provide important “group-specific redistributive functions” for a party’s national reelection success. Both full and alternate members of committees are counted as an assignment.
We deviated from Stratman and Baur’s typology in several ways that we wish to clarify at this point. First, their typology also includes a residual category of neutral committees that are said to neither have a clear local nor a clear national focus. In contrast, our typology only distinguishes between two types of committee. This is because we do not see a substantial difference between “neutral” and “policy” committees. They are similar in the sense that both do not provide far-reaching opportunities to please local constituencies and that both are designed to develop partisan policies aimed at national constituencies. The salience of these policies might be different, but nevertheless they concern partisan policies. Second, we slightly changed the list of pork committees. The Stratmann/Baur typology is an expert judgment of essentially two individuals; it is not based upon hard facts. From our point of view, we consider some of the judgments questionable and reconsidered them. The committee on Tourism, which originally was included into the pork committee category, does not distribute larger sums of federal money but rather is a regulatory committee which also helps to coordinate and inform choices taken in other committees such as Transportation or Economics with an eye on the needs of Germany as a country that wishes to attract tourists. We therefore omitted this committee from the pork category. We instead added the Defense Committee to the category of a pork committee since it affects military deployment choices and thus has significant ramifications for local economies.¹¹

It is important to note that each legislator can be initially assigned to more than one committee, and multiple assignments are particularly prevalent for members of small parties. In these cases, ¹¹

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¹¹ We mapped the following committees as pork committees: Defense; Food, Agriculture and Forestry (1983,1987, 1998); Food, Agriculture and Consumer Protection (2005, 2009); Transportation (1983, 1987); Transportation, Building, an Housing (1998, 2005); Transportation, Building, Urban Affairs (2009); Regional Planning, Building, Urban Development (1983, 1987). The rest of the committees were mapped as policy committees.
we coded legislators assigned to at least one pork committee as “pork”, even if they also held a policy assignment; legislators assigned to no pork committee were coded as “policy”. Thus our dependent variable has two categories. The distribution is as follows: 61 per cent of all observations are assignments to party committees while 39 per cent are assignments to district committees.

Legislators’ mode of election, controls, hypotheses, and type of analysis

To further support our argument we need to include in our analysis the mode of election, which is of primary importance in Stratmann and Baur’s (2002) analysis. About 48 per cent (N=1235) of all our observations in the final data set are related to legislators elected in the nominal tier (coded as 1) while the rest of the observations are related to legislators elected in the list tier.

In light of the German party system and our previous observations on the process of committee assignments in this country in our analysis we control for the size of party. According to Stratmann and Baur (2002) legislators representing small parties should not care at all about the nominal vote and thus should not perceive district committees as means to improve their electoral fortunes. This is because small party candidates do not have many chances to win nominal-tier seats. More often than not they do not come even close. Consequently, Stratmann and Baur (2002) disregard small parties from their analysis. However, in light of our previous remarks on the phenomenon of contamination between the two tiers of election in Germany’s mixed-member system we argue that even small parties should care about nominal votes and thus should pursue personnel strategies similar to large parties. Consequently we included small parties but added a dummy for small party to control for party size (members of the Greens, Left, FDP are coded as 1); 23.3 percent of our observations (N=672) are related to legislators representing small parties.

As always, there are exceptions to this rule: in 2005, the Greens won one district in Berlin and the Left won 3 districts in Berlin.

This choice obviously is not neutral to our model and also to possible outcomes. By including small parties we introduce a set of actors into the analysis that has no choice to either assign nominally elected legislators
We also decided to control for legislators’ ties to their local party organization. We did this on the basis of a variable that measures whether legislators held or still hold leadership positions in their party at the local level. We inserted this as a control and not as a measure for localness since holding local party positions might go both ways. They might either enhance local or party loyalties. This control is aimed to gauge the direction of their effects. Also, we control for the number of legislators’ legislative terms and thus whether they are senior or junior members of the Bundestag. We suspect that in the course of parliamentary socialization legislators should develop a more pronounced policy profile and a better policy expertise and should thus become more valuable for parties to be assigned to policy committees.

The previous theoretical and empirical considerations lead us to the following hypotheses that we aim to test in the next section of the paper.

H1: Nominally elected legislators should be more likely to receive a committee assignment, which will enable them to please their local constituency.

H2: Legislators with local biographies should be more likely to receive a committee assignment, which will enable them to please their local constituency independent of their mode of election.

H3: Legislators with strong local political ties should be more likely to receive a committee assignment that will enable them to please their local constituency independent of their mode of election.
We will test these hypotheses in the following on the basis of a binary logistical regression model since we are interested in whether legislators are either assigned to a pork or policy committee. Our dataset contains information for the same legislator for different periods of time. Thus, we have for some legislators repeated observations over time. We assume that those observations are independent across legislators but not necessarily within the same legislator. We account for this interdependence by clustering the standard errors accordingly.

THE POLITICS OF COMMITTEE ASSIGNMENTS IN THE BUNDESTAG

We distinguished in the previous section between two types of legislative committees: district and party committees. While we have a total of 2575 committee assignments a majority of our observations (1571) concerns seat assignments to policy committees; the remaining 1004 cases concern district committee assignments. Table 3 provides a quick bivariate overview of the relationship between the “localness” of legislators, their modes of election, and the type of committees they were assigned to.

Tab. 3: The relationship of “localness” and committee type in bivariate perspective

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>District</th>
<th>Cramer’s V</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mode</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nom</td>
<td>50.2</td>
<td>47.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List</td>
<td>49.8</td>
<td>52.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LocalPol</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>32.1</td>
<td>47.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>57.1</td>
<td>46.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Cell entries are percentage points
Table 3 supports our main theoretical expectation with regard to the relationship between local political experiences in elected offices on the one hand and assignments to district committees on the other (H 3). It demonstrates that a higher number of legislators with moderate or strong local political roots is assigned to district committees compared to legislators with no local political roots. Obviously, district committees are more likely to be staffed with those experienced in local politics. Cramer’s V indicated a weak but nevertheless existing statistical relationship.

Table 3 nevertheless also contains some surprising news from the perspective of our theoretical expectations (H1). It shows that the number of nominally elected legislators assigned to district committees differs only slightly from the number of legislators elected via party lists and assigned to district committees. The former group is larger as we would expect but the differences are minor which is also indicated by Cramer’s V. Table 3 does not include bivariate evidence on our third independent variable, namely the local biographies of legislators. Similar to the mode of election, we find no descriptive relationship between legislators’ committee assignments and their biographical localness. Politically relevant local orientations are rooted in politics not in biographies.

We aim to see in the following to what degree the above demonstrated bivariate relationship between political localness and district committee assignment holds in light of our control variables and also vis-à-vis our other independent variables. We therefore estimate a binary logistical regression model based on the variables introduced above. The level of analysis is the type of committee seat including full members and alternate members. The standard errors are clustered by the individual legislators because some MPs are initially assigned to more than one committee. The results are presented in Table 4.

The results shown in Table 4 demonstrate that localness as shown in legislators’ political backgrounds does have some systematic impact on their committee assignments. The more legislators’ careers are rooted in local contexts the more likely it is that they are assigned to a district rather than a party committee. This result is consistent with our theoretical expectations and supports H3.
### Table 4: Predicting Committee Assignments in the Bundestag

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>District</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mode of Election (1 = nominal tier)</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Biography</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Politics</td>
<td>0.34**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Party</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legislative terms</td>
<td>-0.11**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Party (1 = yes)</td>
<td>-0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-0.39**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.17)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[N^* = 1886\]
\[\text{No. of Cluster} = 1172\]
\[\text{LL} = -1242\]
\[\text{PCP} = 61\]

Standard errors in parentheses; * \( p < 0.10 \), ** \( p < 0.05 \), *** \( p < 0.01 \)

Table 4 also corroborates the results of our bivariate analysis with regard to the effects of the mode of election on committee assignments. The relationship points into the right direction but fails to show significance. We will further explore this issue below by looking into effect strengths. Table 4 also corroborates the observation, that biographical ties to districts are not the most crucial mechanism to fuel legislators’ local foci of representation and also external perceptions of talent. It is experience in local politics that matters in this regard.

Our findings apparently hold not only for legislators representing large parties but also for those representing small parties. Legislators representing small parties are not significantly less likely to be assigned to district committees compared to legislators representing large parties. With
regard to legislators’ leadership experiences in local parties we also see no effect neither in positive nor negative ways. However, most importantly, we see an effect of legislators’ seniority on the likelihood of receiving a pork assignment. This likelihood decreases with increasing seniority. Legislators with increasing experiences in national legislative politics are increasingly less likely to pursue and to be considered for a pork assignment.

Fig. 1: Average Marginal Effects of Mode of Election and Experience with Local Politics

In order to explore and further clarify the size of the demonstrated effect of localness we estimate the average marginal effect of “Experience with Local Politics” and “mode of election”. Our strategy to get an average marginal effect is as follows. Based on our model we calculate the difference of two predicted probabilities for each observation in the estimation sample when assuming our key variable of interest, say mode-of-election, changes from the maximum, i.e., ‘1’
(nominally elected), to the minimum, i.e., ‘0’ (elected through party list). For all other variables we use the values actually taken on by each observation in our data (aka “observed value approach”). After calculating the marginal effect for each observation we compute the average across those marginal effects to obtain the average marginal effect in the sample. In order to account for the uncertainty in our model predictions we draw simulations from a multivariate normal distribution with a mean vector represented by the estimated coefficients of our logit model and a variance represented by the estimated variance-covariance matrix of our logit model (King, et al. 2000). The estimate size of the average marginal effects together with their 95% confidence interval is provided in Figure 1. The dashed line indicates an effect size of 0, i.e. as long as the confidence intervals intersect with this line, we cannot consider the estimated effect as systematically different from zero.

Figure 1 demonstrates a positive but nevertheless very small effect for mode of election. Nominally elected legislators are on average two percentage points more likely to get assigned to a pork committee than their respective party-list colleagues. While pointing into the correct direction the size in relation to the uncertainty inherent in those estimates are not big enough to reject the null hypothesis that those predicted differences are due to chance alone. In contrast, we observe a very different picture when evaluating the average effect of prior experiences in local electoral politics. Legislators who previously held multiple elected offices at the local level, i.e. that score ‘2’ on our related index, are in our sample on average about 16 percentage points more likely than legislators that lack any local political ties to get assigned to a pork committee. This finding indicates that political types of localness are highly instrumental in motivating legislators to pursue pork committees and also in making political parties to consider them.

CONCLUSION

Our analysis advances the notion that individual talent in the form of “localness” matters for the committee assignments of legislators independent from the mode of election in Germany’s mixed electoral system. We are able to demonstrate that legislators with significant local political ties are more likely to be assigned to district committees that allow bringing home some pork to
please local constituents. Strikingly, we are not able to find any effect of legislators’ modes of
election. Nominally elected legislators are not more likely to be assigned to district committees
to please local constituents. This finding is robust across the five legislative terms that we look at ranging from 1983 to 2009.

We interpret our main finding as the result of a “personnel strategy” by which German parties would deploy their legislators to posts that would help with various collective goals of the party. These goals include developing policy expertise and satisfying social interests, all in the context of seeking to win more seats in future elections. In Germany’s mixed-member proportional system, seats are ultimately won predominately by how well the party does at the national level in obtaining party-list votes. However, parties also run candidates in a nominal tier of single-seat district contests, comprising about half the seats. Our argument is that parties have an interest in ensuring that they deploy legislators in such a way as to take advantage of those that have a local orientation, because such candidates can help the party win votes in the nominal tier, which spills over into—or contaminates—the list tier. Thus locally oriented legislators are beneficial regardless of whether they win a nominal-tier district seat, or are elected via the party list. Parties are interested in obtaining contamination benefits on their list vote by running candidates in the nominal tier who have a strong local focus.

Despite our focus on the German case, we consider any candidate-centered electoral system susceptible to the politics of committee assignments outlined in this paper. Electoral systems that allow voters to take choices on candidates provide incentives to political parties to take advantage of individual level talent and to target geographic constituents on the basis of locally well-connected legislators. These legislators link parties with local political contexts to better mobilize voters and receive feedback for responsive policies. In times of electoral de-alignment in Western European established democracies these resources might even increase in importance in future times.

Despite our focus on the politics of assigning seats to pork committees, we consider other kinds of talent crucial for other kinds of committee assignments in the context of a larger “personnel strategy” of political parties. This paper does not study this issue. However, one of our findings
point into this direction. We find, that increasing seniority results in decreasing likelihood of being assigned to a pork committee. This suggests that increasingly experienced legislators with increasing policy expertise become more valuable for political parties in other party committee posts.

Electoral incentives are not the only factors structuring committee assignment processes. Studying them in isolation as parts in this process is nevertheless important because they should have larger systemic implications, for instance with regard to public policies. If parties assign legislators based on “localness,” the likelihood of using the “pork barrel” increases significantly, as legislators who sit on district-focused committees use their influence in the legislative process to direct benefits to the local areas to which they are tied. Studying the impact of electoral incentives on the committee assignment process is also important with regard to the politics of democratic systems. If the politics of committee assignments follow electoral incentives and individual level motivations, legislators with a strong local focus will constantly raise challenges for the cohesion of parliamentary parties, which need to be actively managed by the party leadership. Because of these crucial ramifications for the larger policy process, it is most important to keep a close eye on committee assignment processes and the impact of electoral incentives on this process.
REFERENCES


