“Understanding Parliamentarians: Individual Goals and Behaviour in European Legislatures”
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Abstract
For decades, the analysis of parliaments in parliamentary democracies focused on political parties (assumed to behave as unitary actors) and neglected any investigation of the behaviour and goals of individual parliamentarians. As a consequence, we know very little, theoretically or empirically, about the goals and behaviour of parliamentarians in Europe. The workshop aims to overcome this deficit by seeking a conceptual framework for capturing the goals of individual MPs and the trade-offs they face, by systematically mapping individualized behaviour in European parliaments across parliamentary activities, countries, and time, and by taking first steps towards explaining the causes of such behaviour and exploring its consequences.

Key questions of the workshop are: (1) What does the institutional incentive and opportunity structure for individualized behaviour look like across countries and time? (2) To what extent do we observe individualized behaviour in European parliaments and how does such behaviour vary across countries, time, and activities (like voting, initiatives, speeches, questions, campaigning, and communication with voters)? (3) Can institutional incentives and opportunity structures explain observed behaviour? (4) What are the consequences of individualized behaviour for parliamentary processes, parliamentary outcomes, the role of political parties, and ultimately our understanding of representative parliamentary democracy?

We invite theoretical and empirical papers dealing with these questions, in particular comparative papers addressing cross-country or temporal variance in individualized behaviour or its institutional basis. While our main focus is on theoretically guided empirical studies, we are open for papers extending the empirical discussion to the normative consequences of individualized MP behaviour.
Questions and Goals of the Workshop

For decades, analyses of parliaments in parliamentary democracies focused on political parties (assumed to behave as unitary actors) and neglected any investigation of the goals and behaviour of individual parliamentarians. In recent years, however, individual MPs have gained more attention in studies of European democracies. This shift in focus is tied to the increased prominence of the rational choice approach in legislative research arguing that we have to start from individual behaviour – which may or may not be highly uniform within parties – to understand parliamentary processes and outcomes.

Empirically, diverse studies have claimed that MPs engage in individualized behaviour in pursuing their personal goals instead of simply following the demands of their party leadership. Such behaviour can for example be observed in voting against the party line in parliament (e.g. Carey 2007; Depauw/Martin 2009; Kam 2009; Martin 2012; Sieberer 2006, 2010), in the use of parliamentary speeches (Bernauer/Bräuninger 2009; Proksch/Slapin 2012) and questions (Martin/Rozenberg 2011; Russo/Wiberg 2010), in the choice of committee positions (Stratmann/Baur 2002), in direct communication with voters via non-party channels like the internet (Zittel 2008), and in designing individualized election campaigns (Seyd/Whiteley 2002; Zittel/Gschwend 2008).

Despite increased data on individual behaviour, scholars disagree on its significance and its implications for our understanding of parliaments and parliamentary democracies more generally. One strand of the literature argues that such independent action amounts to a general individualization of politics characterized by more independent MPs and weaker political parties and tie the phenomenon to trends of partisan de-alignment in the electorate (Cain/Ferejohn/Fiorina 1987; Carty 2004; Zittel/Gschwend 2008). Other authors emphasize the continuously strong position of political parties in public office and rather interpret such phenomena as a party-based strategy of adaptation to new campaign technologies in more diverse and fluid electoral markets that do not imply any weakening of the party’s grip on its MPs once they are in office (Mair/Müller/Plasser 2004; Strøm 2000; Thies 2000).

In short, we still no very little about the goals and actions of individual parliamentarians in Europe and the consequences of such behaviour. The workshop tries to narrow these gaps in several ways. First, it addresses the goals of MPs: What motivates individual MPs in European democracies? The triad of policy, office, and vote goals has proven very useful for understanding the behaviour of political parties and the trade-off they face in pursuing multiple, partly incompatible goals (Müller/Strøm 1999; Strøm 1990). Thus, a central question
for the workshop is whether this conceptual scheme can be applied to individual MPs and how it might have to be adapted (see Strøm 1997).

Second, we want to systematically map manifest behaviour of individual MPs in European parliaments across parliamentary activities, countries, and time. While there is some literature on individual voting behaviour on recorded votes, our knowledge on activities such as initiating bills, making speeches, asking questions, communicating with voters, and conducting individual election campaigns is more limited. Any attempt to explain such behaviour presupposes solid descriptive information on individualized action and its variation across countries and over time which we hope to compile in the context of this workshop.

Third, we want to take first steps towards theoretical and empirical explanations of the causes of individualization. From a rational choice institutionalist perspective, individual behaviour should be driven by both individual goals and the institutional rules structuring the interaction of MPs within and outside of parliament. Thus, variation in individualized behaviour could be tied to factors like parliamentary rules, electoral system rules promoting personal vote seeking, candidate nomination rules, party organizational factors, career paths for MPs, individual resources, the context of political competition, and technological developments in communication channels. Clearly, different factors will be important for different aspects of individualized behaviour, and the relevance of explanatory variables should differ over time and across countries.

Fourth, we aim at exploring the consequences of individualization for our understanding of the role political parties and individual MPs in making representative democracy work. If MPs really pursue individual goals and act more autonomously, interesting empirical and normative questions emerge on how different interests are aggregated, on how voters can affect political decisions and hold officeholders accountable, and on how political decisions are legitimated. While many legislative scholars continue to think about these issues in a party government framework (Katz 1986), it may well be necessary to slightly adapt our general understanding of parliamentary democracy to deal with individualized MP behaviour.

Given these general concerns, the workshop will centre on the following empirical and theoretical questions:

1. How can we conceptualize the goals of individual MPs (e.g. policy, office, and votes) and the trade-offs they produce in a way that allows systematic empirical research across countries and over time?
2. What does the institutional incentive and opportunity structure for individualized behaviour (as determined e.g. by factors like parliamentary rules, electoral rules, promotional prospects, and individual resources) look like across countries and time?

3. To what extent do we observe individualized behaviour in European parliaments and how does this sort of behaviour vary across countries, time, and activities (e.g. voting, initiatives, speeches, questions, campaigning, communication with voters…)?

4. Can institutional incentives and opportunity structures [our second question] explain observed behaviour [our third question]?

5. What are the consequences of individualized behaviour for parliamentary processes, parliamentary outcomes, the role of political parties, and ultimately our understanding of representative parliamentary democracy?

Potential Participants
Given the wide array of individualized behaviour of MPs, the workshop targets a large audience of scholars working on legislative politics, political parties, electoral campaigning, political representation, and electoral systems. We equally encourage senior and young scholars to apply. Given the descriptive goals of the workshop (questions 2 and 3), we are particularly interested in attracting participants from a large number of countries.

Types of Papers
We invite theoretical and empirical papers dealing with the questions of individualization outlined above. We particularly welcome comparative papers focusing on cross-country and/or temporal variance in individualized behaviour or the institutional basis for such behaviour. While our main focus is on theoretically guided empirical studies, we are open for papers extending the empirical discussion to the normative consequences of individualized MP behaviour.

Biographical Details
Shane Martin is Lecturer in Government at the School of Law and Government and Director of the Centre for International Studies at Dublin City University. His research focuses on the political economy of legislative organization and in particular on how electoral incentives shape representatives’ preferences. He currently serves as Co-Convenor of the ECPR Standing Group on Parliaments and was founding Co-Director of the European Summer School on Parliaments. He is a member of the Editorial Board of Legislative Studies Quarterly and Irish Political Studies. He is co-editor (with Thomas Saalfeld, and Kaare Strøm of The Oxford Handbook of Legislative Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming, 2013). Recent journal articles have been published in Party Politics, Legislative
Ulrich Sieberer is a Fellow at the Department of Politics and the Zukunftskolleg and Head of the Research Group on Comparative Parliamentary Politics at University of Konstanz. His research interests focuses on comparative politics in European nation states, especially on comparative legislative research, parliamentary behavior, institutional change, and judicial politics. He is the author of Parlamente als Wahlorgane. Parlamentarische Wahlbefugnisse und ihre Nutzung in 25 europäischen Demokratien (Nomos 2010) and journal articles in Electoral Studies, West European Politics, Political Studies, Government and Opposition, Journal of Legislative Studies, German Politics, and Politische Vierteljahresschrift.

References


